

Meet the 'Daring Dames'

Women who broke barriers in the spotlight

By Hillary Wolfe
CORRESPONDENT

When Phyllis Tomkins joined Arcadia's Rotary Club in 1987, some men threatened to quit.

"They didn't want any 30-year old women's libbers," recalled Tomkins, who was the first woman to join the Rotary, paving the way for a larger female presence in the organization today.

"Nobody quit," said Tomkins' friend and fellow Rotarian Benjamin Goland. "Not one, because they realized they've got something good."

The Arcadia Historical Society spent a recent Sunday afternoon acknowledging and applauding women like Tomkins who broke barriers for the community.

Eight women in a program called "Daring Dames" participated in a panel discussion for a crowd of about 80 at the Arcadia Community Center, which was followed by a reception.

Besides Tomkins, panel members included Arcadia's first woman mayor, Floretta Lauber; first woman patrol officer, Louise Brandsma; first woman firefighter, Beth Decoteau; retired city treasurer and WASP (Women's Air Force Service Pilot), Catherine Murphy; one of the city's first woman physicians, Marie Schmitt; and Mickey Ball and Mary Young, who spoke about their experiences as WAVES (Women's Auxiliary of Volunteer Service for the U.S. Navy).

Marny Hackley, who has been curator of the museum since 2001, said she wanted to put on this event in honor of Women's History Month. The museum will carry an exhibit displaying the accomplishments of other local women for the month of April.

"We have lots of field trips for 'Daring Dames' through April," she said.

Hackley gave each woman an opportunity to discuss her particular achievement. Young, who was also the second woman mayor for the city, said her predecessor opened the door. "Thank you, Floretta," she said, "for laying the groundwork."

Young remembered that when she joined City Council in 1984 the men were concerned about watching their language until they realized she had served in the Navy. Then they figured she could handle it.



Staff photo by WALT MANCINI

FLORETTA LAUBER, right, Arcadia's first female mayor, makes a point during the "Daring Dames: Women's Firsts in Arcadia" panel discussion at the Arcadia Community Center, as the city's first female firefighter, Beth Decoteau, left, and first female police officer Louise Brandsma, listen. Eight female pioneers talked about how they broke the proverbial glass ceiling in their respective fields.

Murphy recalled the friends she made in the Air Force, when she served with about 1,000 others during World War II.

"Four hundred and fifty are still living," she said. "That's a pretty good percentage."

But Murphy didn't think about breaking stereotypes when she joined the service.

"We all went into service to do what we loved to do," she said. Murphy served as a flight instructor, and became a WASP because she loved to fly. She worked as city treasurer for 27 years, retiring in 1982.

As a Rotarian, Tomkins boasts perfect attendance, and loved never having to worry that someone else was wearing the same outfit. She also said she never set out to break barriers. "It was never my mission to bring women into the Rotary," she said. "I have brought good Rotarians."

Ball carried top-secret messages from the

Bureau of Naval Personnel to the Pentagon during the Korean War, and achieved the highest rank possible — captain. She called her experience "sheer heaven."

Schmitt began practicing medicine in California at a county hospital for \$60 month. In 1955 she joined Methodist Hospital. She has seen female medical students grow from being only 5 percent of a graduating class to 50 percent.

"I never asked for anything special because I was a woman," she said.

When Lauber was first appointed to the Planning Commission in 1967, she was addressed as Mrs. Harry Lauber. But it was Floretta Lauber who joined City Council in 1974, serving as mayor in 1976.

"I'm still in business," she said.

As a firefighter, Brandsma said she would like to see higher ranks given to the women on the force, but not just because of their sex.

"Make them earn it — with the same rules," she said.

Decoteau was surprised by negative reactions from her fellow police officers' wives. Several other panel members nodded their agreement with her observation.

"A lot of it is educating the wives," she said. "I'm not here because I want to steal your husband. I'm in it because I love what I do."

Hackley said the museum exhibit was a good start to "celebrate women's history month, to celebrate who we are and what we do."

The "Daring Dames" exhibit can be viewed through the end of this month at the Arcadia Historical Society, Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Hillary Wolfe can be reached by e-mail at hillwolfe@hotmail.com

